The Benefits of Intergovernmental Cooperation

In order to better understand both the benefits of intergovernmental cooperation among fire departments and the process that was required to accomplish the arrangements, several communities that had been through, or are in the process of, regionalizing their fire departments were consulted. In those communities where some form of cooperation among the fire departments has been implemented the following advantages were typically cited:

Improved professional training. Regionalizing has allowed fire fighters to dedicate time to training without being called away for emergencies or relying on costly overtime.

Reduced costs. Purchasing supplies and equipment through joint bidding has streamlined the purchasing process and captured economies of scale. Selling excess equipment and sharing maintenance costs has been another way of realizing immediate savings.

Reduced overtime. A regionalized fire district has reduced reliance on overtime to fulfill everyday staffing needs.

Improved response capabilities. In some cases, a reduction in companies has improved the ability of the fire department to respond to emergencies with better manning levels. By eliminating town boundaries, overlap and duplication of fire suppression was reduced. Under a regionalized system the closest station to an emergency responds.

Improved public education and inspection programs. A regionalized organization has allowed personnel to dedicate more time to these activities.

After consolidating three fire departments in Tualatin Valley, Oregon, the participating communities saved over $1.2 million in the past five years. According to Chief Jeff Johnson, the consolidation has been nothing short of successful.

As a result of an intergovernmental agreement in Macomb County, Michigan, to be executed later this year, the departments will reduce the cost involved with required professional training by sharing fire fighters at regular pay when others have to be sent out for training. This agreement will eliminate the expense of paying over-time to fire fighters to ensure adequate coverage.

Examples & Experiences of Regionalized Fire Services

Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue, Washington County, Oregon. 1988.

In the late 1980s, three fire departments in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area began to see that they were duplicating apparatus, staffing and equipment, while at the same time working closely together through mutual aid agreements. Duplication was especially apparent at the mid-manager and support level. EMS officers, financial officers and other department positions were found in triplicate. Each department had good delivery systems and public relations, as well as a strong identity and sense of autonomy. After a rocky start of working together to find an amenable solution, the three fire chiefs agreed to study the feasibility of a consolidation. The eight city service area encompasses 175 square miles and had a population of 210,000. In 1989, the three departments were consolidated without eliminating any fire fighter's position. Through attrition and buyouts, 13 top management positions were eventually eliminated at an estimated savings to the to department of over $1.2 million in the past five years. According to Chief Jeff Johnson, service provision is more efficient, new stations have been built, apparatus purchased and the tax rate has been reduced.

Metro Macomb Fire District, Michigan, 1993.

This proposal, prepared by the fire chiefs from six neighboring municipalities in Michigan, recommended a fully consolidated fire district to serve the 211,000 residents of their region. A